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Bringing all together for research capacity building in LMICs

Authors' reply

We thank Bolajoko Olusanya and Robert Opoka, and Pratik Khanal for their thoughtful reflections on our Comment.¹ We agree with their points and would like to add some nuances to the discussion of this topic.

Khanal points out that the role of researchers in low-income and middle-income countries (LMICs) is often restricted to data collection. We agree that this all-consuming role does not leave researchers with enough time to fully engage scientifically in projects before moving onto the next data collection mission. To overcome this hurdle, action is required by all research partners. However, we believe that, as a first step, researchers from high-income countries should offer workshops that engage researchers in LMICs in the development of ideas and analysis of results. Funders could facilitate this action by ensuring this engagement is a stated and costed aim in all grant applications.

Olusanya and Opoka mention the fear of unwholesome data mining by foreign collaborators. This scenario is a sensitive issue both for researchers who have collected data (and want credit for their efforts) and for researchers who have a novel idea and require data to answer a question. We believe any initiative that uses previously collected data—whether open source or not—needs, where possible, to ensure involvement of the original researchers in subsequent analyses and, where needed, to ensure funding for their active participation in these analyses. Some researchers have set out their own principles for data sharing.²

Olusanya and Opoka discuss the role that memoranda of understanding can play in ensuring equitability of partnerships. While we agree such documents can be useful, it should

be ensured that they are not just superficial reassurances that could be disregarded at a later date.

With regards to the use of codes of conduct mentioned, one such example is the Research Fairness Initiative. There are also practical guidelines—for example, from the Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries—that can be useful screening tools for researchers looking to engage in balanced partnerships. Funders could also require that their high-income country grantees follow these guidelines. We agree that they should be more widely used.

However, we believe that strengthening the recommendations around authorship could be one of the most effective drivers for change. Recommendations from journals, which could be reinforced by guidance from the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors, should go beyond ensuring that researchers in LMICs are authors on papers. Contributor statements should declare that these authors have been able to contribute substantially to research development and paper writing. Health research journals and academics should also consider rethinking how authorship is valued. The value placed on first, second, and final authors leads to competition, rather than collaboration, amongst researchers; with LMIC researchers often playing the least prominent roles. An alphabetical list of authors with honest contributors' statements could foster greater collaboration.

Ultimately, although cultural shifts tend to be more substantial than rules are, rules are useful tools to affect changes in mindset. Until such rules are widely adopted, all individuals and organisations involved in health research should have issues of equitability at the forefront of their minds when entering into partnerships. Stephen Sevalie—a colleague in Sierra Leone—stated that researchers in LMICs sometimes

feel like amateur players competing against a premier league football team. Researchers need to act together to ensure a more equal playing field.

DB is organising a meeting with both the Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries and the Council for Health Research and Development. JD was Editor-in-Chief of *The Lancet Diabetes & Endocrinology* when this Letter was accepted. We have no other competing interests to declare.

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- 1 Beran D, Byass P, Gbakima A, Kahn K, Sankoh O, Tollman S, et al. Research capacity building—obligations for global health partners. *Lancet Glob Health* 2017; **5**: e567–68.
- 2 Sankoh O, Byass P. The INDEPTH Network: filling vital gaps in global epidemiology. *Int J Epidemiol* 2012; **41**: 579–88.



For more on the **Research Fairness Initiative** see <http://rfi.cohred.org/>

For more on the **Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries** see <https://naturalsciences.ch/organisations/kfpe>